THE ROLE OF THE CONGREGATION

Trinity Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, GA
February 5, 2000
Presentation #2

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In her new book, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott begins with an account of her conversion. "My coming to faith," she writes, "did not start with a leap but rather with a series of staggers." It is a strong story, told in strong language, occasionally language too salty to be used in the pulpit. Anne Lamott was brought up in an intentionally non-religious household.

Her father, a California intellectual and a writer, was hostile to religion. He particularly didn't like Presbyterians, whom he called "God's Frozen People." In her childhood, adolescence and college years, however, religious questions kept surfacing in her life. As an adult, life became very difficult for her. Her father, a life-long heavy drinker, developed a brain tumor and started to die. Her best friend, a source of stability and sanity since childhood, developed cancer and started to die. Nothing was working—personal relationships, family, her writing career—and she was drinking and using drugs heavily.

One day, near the very bottom, she called an Episcopal priest, and in his office poured everything out—her drinking, drugs, fear, affairs, the fact that she didn't really believe anything. Prayer was out of the question. So he said, "Stop praying for a while and let me pray for you." She writes, "He was about the first Christian I ever met whom I could stand to be in the same room with. Most Christians seemed almost hostile in their belief that they were saved and you weren't."(p. 43).

Slowly, she came to life, and her encounter with a church was critical. Every Sunday morning in Marin City California she went to a flea market in the Greyhound Bus Depot parking lot. She went to watch people, enjoying wonderful ethnic food and checking out the tools, clothes, blankets, and household wares—much of it stolen goods.

And then she began to hear music, gospel music coming from a little church across the street, which turned out to be St. Andrew Presbyterian. Her description is classic.

“It looked homely and impoverished, a ramshackle building with a cross on top, sitting on a small parcel of land with a few skinny pine trees.” She knew some of the hymns from the time she used to go to church with her grandparents. She began to stand in the doorway and listen. “I couldn’t believe how rundown it was, with terrible linoleum and plastic stained-glass windows. It had a choir of five black women and one rather Amish-looking white man and a congregation of thirty people or so, radiating kindness and warmth.

During the time when people hugged and greeted each other, various people would come back to where I stood to shake my hand or try to hug me. I was as frozen and still as Richard Nixon.”

She stood in that doorway for months, listening to the singing, watching as this poor little congregation brought huge tubs of food for homeless people. Finally, she stepped through the door and, as inconspicuously as possible, sat in a folding chair near the door in order to escape before the sermon.

It was the people - their singing together - that drew her back week after week, from the flea market to her folding chair near the door. Finally, after a medical crisis of her own, one Sunday morning the dam broke, the flood gates opened. She began to cry, walked home, and said to God, “I quit. All right, you can come in.” She reduced her dependence on chemicals and eventually stopped drinking. A year later was baptized. Her little church rallied around her when she became pregnant, a second time, stood beside her, adopted her new son.

The book is dedicated to the people of that little church. In Lamott's earlier best seller, *Bird by Bird*, the acknowledgement page includes these words:

> "I want to mention once again that I do not think I would be alive today if not for the people of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, Marin City, California."

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." Anyone who spends any time around the institutional church not church in the abstract, but the institution, with its worn-out linoleum and its

19th century hymns and its propensity to trivialize its own gospel and its tendency to make mountains out of molehills and what is far worse, molehills out of mountains, and its use of its own message of love and redemption to be unlovely and hateful and exclusive - anyone who knows anything about the institutional church becomes impatient with it and sometimes sick at heart over it. We want it to be more inclusive, more biblical, more relevant, more Christocentric, more businesslike, friendlier, bigger . . . .

“Maybe the best thing that could happen to the church,” Frederick Buechner wrote, “would be for some great tidal wave of history to wash it all away, the church buildings tumbling, the church money all lost, the church bulletins blowing through the air like dead leaves, the differences between preachers and congregations all lost too. Then all we would have left would be each other and Christ, which was all there was in the first place.” (*The Clown in the Belfry*, p. 158).

But then, every now and then, in fact, a lot of "nows and thens," something like what happened to Anne Lamott at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church happens, and life is saved, recovered, healed, reformed, loved, appreciated, celebrated, turned around. Every now and then, a human life is comforted, challenged, stimulated, reimagined, reanimated, renewed, reconciled, saved—not usually in the abstract, not ever in the abstract, in fact, but always because of church. Church in some mysterious and magnificent way being salt of the earth and light of the world;

church giving to the world, which includes its own members, the only thing it has, regardless of the beauty of its buildings or the heft of its bank accounts, and that is Jesus Christ.

“Salt of the earth,” he said. “Light of the world,” he said. “You are salt and light,” he said.

Modest metaphors. Neither is necessarily dramatic, certainly not overwhelming. Functional metaphors. Both act on the environment; both, in spite of their modesty, have a dramatic effect. Salt changes food,

makes it more tasty, more lively.

Light abolishes darkness. The darker the darkness, the more visible the light—even a tiny candle. You need to have light in order to see, you need light in order to find your way home, or wherever it is you are going.

You are salt of the earth; light of the world, he told his disciples. The great temptation of Christianity and the church has always been to get out of the world, to withdraw to a monastery, a mountaintop, or behind gothic stone walls. “You are salt and light,” he said. Your job is to live in the world on my behalf; to be seasoning for the world; to be light for the world.

It will be Lent in a few weeks and always, the Sunday before Lent, the common lectionary wants us to hear the story of the Transfiguration—yearly—that deeply spiritual experience when a few disciples broke through and, momentarily at least, seemed to understand who he was. The best part of that story, I have always felt, is what comes next.

The disciples want to stay up there on the mountain, to revel in their spiritual experience. Peter even wants to build a shrine, a retreat center, up there in the pure, rarified air of the mountaintop. But Jesus leads them back down to the valley, to the people, the clamoring crowds, to the dirt and sickness and injustice and the joy and ecstasy and delight of human life; down to a sick little boy and his frantic father.

"In Jesus, God hits the streets," Jim Wallis says. "God is in this with us." (*Envisioning the New City: A Reader on Urban Ministry*).

And Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his Nazi prison cell, writing to his parents the day after an assassination attempt on Hitler's life failed and therefore the day he knew, with a final certainty, that he was going to die: "During the last year or so I have come to appreciate the worldliness of Christianity as never before. I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life or something like it. Later I discovered and am still discovering up to this very moment that it is only by living completely in the world that one learns to believe." (*Letters and Papers from Prison, July 21, 1944*).

It was an important moment in my own journey when I began to see that being a Christian, an intentional follower of Jesus, means living more deeply in the world, not less; that Jesus Christ does not want us to withdraw from human life in order to be faithful to him, but to plunge more deeply into life; the purpose of the enterprise is to make us more, not less, human (Dietrich Bonhoeffer) ; that Christian faith and Christian life are not adhering to a list of prohibitions which I, and many others I know, came to assume it was—don’t do this, don’t do that—a life greatly diminished by Jesus Christ. In fact, it is the exact opposite.

Jesus Christ is God's great "Yes," to life; following him means living more intentionally, more passionately, exposing oneself to more love, more pain, more joy, more suffering, more laughter, more tears.

"You are the salt of the earth . . . light of the world."

For years the church I serve has understood its mission, its reason for being, in terms of Jesus' call to follow him into the world. From its inception, on a busy human intersection, a corner where the whole world walks by, this church has opened its doors and its heart to

welcome in all who will come, and to send out into the world all who would follow.

Tutors and students, parents and children, single and married, troubled people needing support, addicted people needing hope, energetic people looking for a better reason to live than their escalating lifestyles, nurses and doctors, social workers and teachers, to the four corners of the world—Korea, Africa, Guatemala; older adults needing a place, someone to pay attention; homeless looking for a place to sleep; hungry people looking for bread to eat;

cold, shivering people needing a coat; young parents needing a safe place for their child; adolescents needing patience and steady, attentive love.

We presume to call ourselves a “light in the city.” Jesus call us the light of the world, and we presume to use that description because that is what we try to be and to do.

The light is for us, too. For the city, we hope the light means hope, illumination, understanding; a little less darkness, perhaps. For us, trying to be Light in the City, light means home.

Douglas John Hall wrote recently that the world is desperately hungry for what the Christian faith and the Christian church inherently has. He says the post-modern world approaching a new millenium is on four quests:

The quest for moral authenticity

The quest for meaning

The quest for transcendence and

The quest for community

Let’s think a little bit about that one.

“Bowling Alone,” is the catchy title of a scholarly essay which appeared recently in *The Journal of Democracy*. The author is Robert Putnam, Professor of International Affairs at Harvard. The full title of his article which everybody is talking about is “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital.” Professor Putnam discovered the curious fact that while the number of people who went to a bowling alley and actually bowled rose by 10% recently, the number of bowling leagues in the country has actually declined by 4-%. Therefore, people are bowling alone.

That may seem like a trivial statistic, but Professor Putnam things it is symbolic of something that is happening widely and deeply in our culture. He calls it our "declining social capital."

The fact is that since the 1970's, there has been a fairly dramatic decline in public participation in voluntary associations. Sociologist Robert Bellah calls it our "crisis of civic membership." Numbers of participants are down or declining in the PTA, the League of Women Voters.

Some analysts attributed the decline to the increase of women in the workplace. But in the 1980's, the same phenomenon emerged in traditionally male associations: Lions, Elks, Shriners. The number of Americans who attended any meeting on civic or educational affairs has fallen by a third in twenty years. (See *Christian Century,* 5/8/96)

It's a worrisome development within American culture, and some of our brightest and best are trying to figure out what it means and why it is happening.

It’s a serious problem because we have learned that values, the illusive phenomenon known as “public morality,” the basic social contracts that allow us to live together, are formed in life’s basic associations: mainly family and community. And when those basic associations disintegrate, so does public morality, and our ability to live together.

It is a concern to the church because what is happening in the culture is mirrored in religious institutions, particularly those, like the Presbyterian Church, which are lodged deeply in the mainstream of the culture.

Arthur Schlesinger has written a book, *The Disunity of America*, that suggests that if we don't find a way to renew our covenant, our belonging to a common community of purpose and hope, we are well on our way to disintegrating into warring tribes. It happens. It happened in Yugoslavia. It threatens to happen in Canada, Northern Ireland, India.

In his fine book, *The Spirit of Community*, Amitai Etzioni probes the soul of our culture and concludes that we are long on rights and entitlements and short on duty and responsibility. Etzioni tells about a talk show guest who in a discussion of the Savings and Loan mess said: "The taxpayers should not have to pay for this, the government should." (p.3) "We suffer," he says, "from a severe case of deficient we-ness. It turned out that an economy can thrive, at least for a while, if people watched out only for themselves. But it has become evident that a society cannot function well given such a self-centered orientation." (p.24)

We almost need a conversion, Etzioni believes, a whole new way of thinking about who we are as a people.

Clarence Page observed recently that professional sports practices an interesting kind of community responsibility. Every year the worst teams get the chance to choose the best players from the pool of available draft picks. And the teams share league profits. “Curiously,” Page went on, “the exact opposite happens in the public sector.

Our poorest children get the worst schools with the worst resources, which almost guarantees they will stay poor. The result is a steadily widening gulf between those who have the greatest chance and those who have the least opportunity to get ahead at all." (See *Context,* Martin Marty, 5/1/96)

Interesting that even the competitive world of professional sports understands the basic value of community, of working together, better than the culture, the body politic understands.

Well, it may seem, at first blush,

preposterous,

but what we believe God has in mind as a response, a redeeming alternative to the process of dividing, choosing up sides, tribe against tribe, nation against nation, race against race, even religion against religion—God's brilliant rejoinder is none other than that blessed little church in Corinth. None other than us.

"What life have you if you have not life together?" T.S. Eliot asked in one of his most famous poems, "Choruses from 'The Rock.'":

> “There is no life that is not in
> community,
> And no community not lived in praise of
> God.”

Theodore Parker Ferris, one of the great American preachers of the past, used to tell the story of a little child who was lost in one of those vast cornfields in Iowa. People searched all day and all night. The search was expanded and continued a second day and night. The third day one of the searchers suggested, “Let’s join hands,” and they did.

A vast company of family and friends and strangers, hand-in-hand, fanned out across the fields. Finally, they found the child, but it was too late. The heart-broken mother said, “Why didn’t we join hands sooner?” (Thanks to The Reverend Calvin Jackson for this story).

God has something else in mind for creation, for nations and tribes and races. God’s son came to bring it, lived to show it, died to make it possible, rose again to create it—in the most unlikely places.

There is a symbol of that new creation, that new beginning.

Jesus himself taught it to his closest friends on an occasion when they were more than tempted to start picking at each other, and to choose up sides and decide who was responsible for things going so wrong.

The ritual is so very simple. And sometimes the ritual becomes the reality and bread becomes the body broken for us and wine becomes blood shed and the act of serving one another and eating and drinking together becomes a holy communion and for a moment, at least, you and I are part of a community,

and God’s new creation breaks in and establishes a toehold in your life, and the new humanity actually starts to emerge, the new being in Jesus Christ, and if the world looks—if you and I raise our eyes and look around and see as we serve one another the bread and the cup—we can actually behold what God has in mind for creation—a family—men and women who belong to one another because they belong to God. A new community lived in praise of God. Communion.

The role of the congregation—

You are to be the salt of the earth—light of the world—to your neighbors—to Atlanta, to the nation, to the Presbyterian Church(USA), and to the world. You are to be a living reminder of the incarnation, our basic, most precious affirmation—that God so loves the world as to send his only son, not to condemn it but to save it.

You are to be a living reminder that God intends life to be full and whole and safe and free—for everyone—and you are to do that, first, by becoming a blessed community—

where each is valued and accepted and loved. When babies are adored and adopted by the community in baptism; when the hurts and suffering of our life are surrounded by pastoral and Christ-like compassion; when men and women gather around those who grieve and stand together in the valley of the shadow of death; a place where truth beyond our ability to describe it is proclaimed in word but also in liturgy as people sing and pray together.

You are to show the world what community looks like—which is to say—what God’s Kingdom looks like—that rare and odd arrangement when Jesus Christ actually is Lord.